Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China*

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarship on protests and other forms of collective action in China. Important insights have been gained into how conflicts between social groups and local governments begin, which strategies and instruments protesters apply, and under which circumstances protests are likely to succeed or fail. However, comparatively little is known about the mobilizing structures and how such collective action can be sustained over a long period of time, in some instances over several years. Such perseverance would be remarkable even in a democracy, but it is more so in an authoritarian system where the risks of participating in collective action are higher and the chances to succeed much smaller. This article compares the development of public protests in two research locations and identifies four factors instrumental to overcoming the formidable challenges of sustaining collective action in China: the continuing existence of substantial grievances; the re-activation of strong social ties; the presence of unifying frames; and an adaptive protest leadership. The comparison shows that the last factor is particularly crucial: while the two villages were similar in all other respects, leadership in village B was far more adaptive than in village A, which goes a long way towards explaining why collective action could be sustained twice as long in village B.

Keywords: collective action; protest; mobilizing structures; social capital; protest leadership; urbanizing China

In a hot and humid week in mid-August 2009, large-scale demonstrations broke out almost simultaneously in two villages on the outskirts of Guangzhou city. Although the demonstrations were peaceful and the protesters did little more than hoist banners, shout slogans and recite speeches, village officials were quite concerned. The protests particularly alarmed village officials for several reasons. First of all, the turnout of these demonstrations was massive. In village

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A, the number of demonstrators ran into hundreds, while allegedly half the population of village B (about 1,500 people) took to the streets. Second, the demonstrators were well prepared: banners had been printed and speeches rehearsed. Third, despite the scope and level of coordination, the officials had received no intelligence that protests were being planned. Fourth, the demonstrators were accusing the village authorities of corruption and demanding their removal.[1] As with so many other cases of collective action in China today, the cause of these demonstrations was land issues: the demonstrators had good reason to fear that they would be insufficiently compensated in the transformation of their village into a neighbourhood (*shequ* 社区) of Guangzhou city.[2]

A fifth matter that would have been of grave concern to the authorities, had they known it at the time, was that these incidents only marked the beginning of struggles that were to last a year in village A, and nearly twice as long in village B. After the demonstrations were dispersed, the activists continued to protest against the redevelopment schemes by means of petitioning to higher level authorities and staging sit-ins at the designated construction sites. In village B, between 100 and 150 villagers assembled at a construction site every morning at 9:00 am and would spend the day there before walking back to their houses in closed formation at 5:00 pm. In village A, about 20 to 30 villagers, most of whom were elderly women, sat at the entrance of the village almost every day.

Direct action at Chinese grassroots level that is sustained for months or even years is not particular to our research location, yet little is known about why collective action in adverse circumstances can be sustained for such a long time. Why do people continue to protest for years if higher-level governments clearly have no intention of accommodating their demands? Why do they risk being stigmatized, beaten up and arrested if their chances of success are so small? What motivates them to return to protest sites day after day despite adverse conditions? The perseverance of these protesters would be remarkable even in a democracy, but it is more so in an authoritarian system where the risks of participating in collective action are greater and the chances of success much smaller.

Comparing collective action in villages A and B allows us to address these puzzles. Drawing on field research data collected by Xianwen Kuang between January 2010 and June 2011,[3] this article argues that four factors are instrumental in overcoming the formidable obstacles of sustaining collective action in China: the continuing existence of substantial grievances; the re-activation of social ties; the presence of unifying frames; and an adaptive protest leadership.

1 Video A, showing the assembly in village A, Guangzhou, taken by villagers on 17 August 2009; Video B, showing the public meeting in village B, Guangzhou, taken by villagers on 22 August 2009.

2 Interviews BI1-5; Interviews BM2. For a list and explanation of interview codes used, please see Appendix.

3 From mid-January to late February 2010, Xianwen Kuang interviewed activists, protestors, villagers, an informant close to the protest leadership, journalists and a government official in the protest locations (see Appendix). Brief on-site follow-up interviews were conducted throughout 2010. To learn about the latest developments, several telephone interviews with key persons in the protests were conducted throughout 2011.

Despite their remarkable similarities, the two villages express marked differences especially with respect to the last two dimensions. These differences go a long way towards explaining why protests continued for twice as long in village B as in village A.

Organizing and Sustaining Collective Action in China

Since the violent suppression of the Tiananmen protests in 1989, and especially since the early 2000s, scholars have devoted much attention to collective actions such as passive resistance, spontaneous uprisings, and planned and organized challenges to state authorities. This area of research has been covered remarkably well despite the fact that the topic is sensitive and information often difficult to obtain. Scores of articles and books provide insights into the reasons for collective action,[4] forms of collective action,[5] its systemic consequences,[6] and the interplay between resistance and counter-resistance at the village level.[7] Despite this wealth of information, comparatively little is known about how large-scale collective protests become organized and how such action can be sustained over a long period of time, especially when protestors receive no support from government officials, journalists, lawyers or other powerful allies.

These issues are at the heart of the theoretical literature on collective action. As Mancur Olson has famously shown, there is no apparent reason for individuals to engage in collective action aimed at achieving a common good: the costs are high, the chances of success low, and individuals do not think that their participation makes a difference. On the other hand, an individual will profit from successful collective action even if he does not participate.[8] The odds for engaging in collective action are even lower in a modern authoritarian state where the government not only commands superior resources to quell dissent by force, but has also become increasingly adept at controlling flows of information and monitoring its population.[9]

Large-scale protests and revolutions occurring after the publication of Olson's seminal book prompted a re-evaluation of these pessimistic findings. While confirming the existence of a collective action problem, scholars provided explanations of how it can be overcome. These explanations, which China scholars quickly integrated into their analyses, focus on four dimensions: selective incentives, frames, social capital and leadership.

Selective incentive theories stress that the collective action problem can be overcome if obtaining private goods is made contingent upon an individual's

4 See, e.g., Lee 2002; O'Brien and Li 1999; Zhou 1993.
5 See, e.g., Li, Lianjiang, 2006; O'Brien and Li, 2006.
6 See, e.g., Chung, Lai and Xia 2006; O'Brien and Li 2005.
7 See, e.g., Cai 2008; Cai 2003.
8 Olson 1965.
9 Göbel 2012.

participation in an activity.[10] The emergence of protests in China seems to confirm this: as Fayong Shi and Yongshun Cai have shown, collective action motivated by selective incentives can be sustained for a long time if success is perceived to be within reach. The Shanghai homeowners they studied struggled for a decade before their eventual success. Being able to capitalize on "disparate priorities among different levels of state authorities" and to form alliances with officials and journalists,[11] they had high (and justified) hopes for success. However, protests have also been sustained for a long time in localities where conditions were less favourable. Examples include the Beijing property owners studied by You-tien Hsing,[12] and the "Dingzhou Incident," where activists had no media support at all.[13]

The existing literature also highlights the importance of "frames" in collective action.[14] For example, Mark Lichbach stresses that a peasant movement will degenerate into banditry if the dispersion of material rewards is not underpinned by collective values.[15] The importance of such frames is illustrated in several other contributions[16] which reveal that protesters not only relate their endeavours to historical precedents and spatial symbolism, but also quite frequently clad their demands in Maoist rhetoric. Again, while the presence of such frames can help to account for participation in an activity, they alone are not sufficient to sustain collective action.

Criticizing the "first generation" collective action theories such as those formulated by Olson, Elinor Ostrom highlights the role of trust in solving the collective action problem. Trust, Ostrom and Ahn argue, can take two forms: one that is "reducible to other forms of social capital,"[17] such as trust resulting from multiple and iterative interactions with positive outcomes, or trust that is backed up by enforceable rules and regulations. The other form of trust, "a trustor's belief about a trustee's motivation," is not reducible.[18] Trust as a solution to the collective action problem has received little attention in China studies. An exception is a recent contribution by Lianjiang Li and Kevin O'Brien on protest leadership in rural China.[19] The authors find that social capital is often (although not always) important for becoming a protest leader, and even more so for mobilizing supporters.[20] Interestingly, they also point out that protest leaders utilize

10 Lichbach 1994.
11 Shi and Cai 2006.
12 Hsing 2010a.
13 Farmers in Dingzhou city, Henan province, camped for two years on land illegally sold to an electricity company. When the farmers were attacked by 300 hired thugs in 2005, the central government stepped in to resolve the conflict in favour of the occupiers.
14 For a useful introduction to different perspectives, see Johnston and Noakes 2005.
15 Lichbach 1994.
16 See, e.g., Chen 2008; Zuo and Benford 1995.
17 Ostrom and Ahn 2001, 20.
18 Ibid., 21. See also Ostrom 1990; Diani and McAdam 2003; Kitts 2000.
19 Li, Lianjiang, and O'Brien 2008.
20 Ibid., 7.

not only trust, but also "the threat of violence, property destruction and social ostracism" to prevent free riding.[21]

Leadership, another potential candidate for explaining sustained collective action in China, has received equally scant attention. A potential starting point, although not related to protests, is Yang Guobin's analysis of "organizational entrepreneurs" in the NGO sector[22] whom he describes as individuals with the knowledge and the will to mobilize resources to create a social organization.

As this brief overview illustrates, the picture of how collective action is sustained in China is sketchy at best. By comparing two instances of collective action from their initiation in the 1990s to their completion in 2010 (village A) and 2011 (village B), this article provides insights into how the severity of grievances, the re-activation of strong social ties, and the utilization of frames can help to sustain collective action in China. Most importantly, it illustrates that an adaptive leadership is crucial for sustaining protests.

Grievances in China's Urban Villages

The events described in the introduction to this article did not, as might be expected, take place somewhere in rural China, but right inside the perimeters of Guangzhou city. Moreover, village A and village B are not ordinary villages, but merely shadows of their former selves: the fields that once surrounded their buildings have long been requisitioned for urban development. Such *chengzhongcun* (城中村), which literally translates as "village(s) amid the city," are not common in China, but are typical in some southern Chinese cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou which have spearheaded the present wave of urbanization in China.[23]

Chengzhongcun are immediately recognizable as parcels of dilapidated multi-story buildings dwarfed by high-rises caging them in on all four sides, and result from the fact that land in rural China is subdivided into agricultural and residential land. When residential land is converted, the peasants must receive extra compensation for the structures already built on the land, such as houses, sheds and stables. As You-tien Hsing vividly illustrates, land conversion is a complicated process in which higher-level governments receive a much larger share of the conveyance fees than village- or township-level governments. Accordingly, the incentives for grassroots officials to short-change the residents are high, making the conversion of residential land an extremely conflict-laden process with low profit margins for grassroots administrations.[24] It is perhaps for this reason that in the past the urban authorities often requisitioned only the agricultural land and left the residential land to the farmers. Their

21 Ibid. Compare this to officials' utilization of relational capital to deter individuals from protesting in Deng and O'Brien 2013.
22 Yang 2005.
23 Li, Tian 2008.
24 See Hsing 2010b.

communities were then effectively encircled by the cities.[25] However, as the cities grew and land became increasingly precious, developers and city authorities naturally began to covet these pieces of land.

The suspicion that earlier land sales had not been correctly budgeted for became the cause of sporadic but regular appeals to higher-level governments by a small number of individuals in both village A and B. These individuals belonged to the sub-categories of "village elites" identified by Li and O'Brien.[26] In village A, the relatives of a former village official were particularly active in the protests, and many other villagers considered them as a "family of heroes." The background of the activists in village B was different. Here, a traditional organization, which promoted cultural traditions like dragon boat competitions and lion dancing, concurrently served as an investigation bureau for local government corruption.[27] In both villages, the activists collected "evidence" exposing the corruption of the Party secretary and time and again informed the higher-level authorities about the alleged misconduct. However, the only sign that their petitions were received was intimidation: activists in village B claimed to have been repeatedly threatened by village officials and reported that one of the petitioners, the nephew of a former provincial congress representative, had his leg broken by hired thugs.[28]

At first, activists had difficulty in mobilizing villagers, who were reasonably content with the income they received from renting out rooms to migrants and the dividends they received as shareholders in the "collective company" that administrated the collective land.[29] As one of the activists put it, "you know, if Chinese people have enough to eat and to drink, they usually do not protest."[30] However, a larger part of the community became involved when residential land was targeted for redevelopment before the commencement of the Asian Games in the city in November 2010. The danger loomed so large that, as one interviewee put it, "we will lose everything."[31] The villagers did not so much resent the redevelopment itself, which came with the contracted right to a brand-new apartment in the redeveloped district. The problem was rather the lack of conviction that the village authorities would honour their promises to compensate the property owners for the temporary accommodation they had to rent while the development was under way, and that they would respect the contract once redevelopment was completed. Without adequate compensation, the villagers would lose their source of income as well as their homes. Those who had not learned a trade would face poverty.

25 Li, Tian 2008.
26 Li, Lianjiang, and O'Brien 2008.
27 On the role of clan and other traditional organizations, see Tsai 2007.
28 Interviews BM2; Petition letter written by protesters in village B, 7 September 2009. The use of hired thugs to enforce local orders is not a recent phenomenon. See Yu 2003a.
29 Interviews BI1-5; Interview BM6; Interviews Sun.
30 Interviews Sun. This explanation resonates with Lynn T. Whyte's (2010) assertion that awareness of rising inequality and unfairness in China does not drive people to rebel because they relate personal well-being much more with hard work, merit and luck.
31 Ibid.

The Re-activation of Strong Social Ties

The very real threat of poverty or at least considerable financial losses provided fertile grounds for the organized expression of dissent. Still, this fear does not explain why the villagers participated in the demonstrations. Individual rewards were not handed out, and non-participation would have been the rational choice for each involved individual; by not participating, they would avoid the considerable danger of being detained, beaten or even imprisoned. If the action were successful, they would still share the spoils. As the following paragraphs illustrate, selective incentives are not a necessary condition to motivate participants in collective action. Other, individual-based interests can fulfil that same role. In the cases studied here, establishing informal norms and making use of family ties explains not only the cohesion of the movement, but also the fact that large-scale demonstrations could be planned without the knowledge of the authorities.

We refer to this process as the "re-activation of strong social ties," by which we mean the augmentation of the "weak ties" of an urbanized society with the existing but dormant "strong ties" of family, clan and kinship.[32] This re-activation mobilizes social capital to rally a large number of participants and to generate trust in the integrity of the leadership, just as Elinor Ostrom has observed. In addition, it serves as an effective social control tool that prevents free riding and abuses of power. Village A and village B are very similar in that they are single-clan villages. Arguably, a single clan is easier to coordinate than several clans. This makes these villages different from other protest sites where protesters cannot rely on such ties.

The ability to draw on both weak and strong ties is particular to *chengzhongcun*. On the one hand, villages A and B were no longer villages in the sense of word, but rather neighbourhoods made up of people who earned their money through office jobs, factory labour and subletting apartments. In the daily life of the villagers, weak ties had become more important than strong ties. This process was quickened by the influx of the resident migrants which had greatly changed the social fabric of the villages.

On the other hand, the rules and relationships underlying strong social ties had not disappeared – they were just less utilized. Less interaction with family members did not mean that "sharing the same root and the same clan" (*tongzong tongzu* 同宗同族) had become irrelevant for the villagers. Several respondents informed us that before the incident, clan ties had become increasingly unimportant in structuring their daily lives. Even blood relatives only infrequently called upon each other. People made friends at work, made contacts with business associates, or simply stayed at home and watched television. However, two activists recounted how the situation quickly changed once the villagers saw that their livelihoods were threatened.[33] Indeed, the impending demolition of their

32 Granovetter 1973; Granovetter 1983.
33 Interview AM1; Interviews AW1.

houses quickly turned the villagers into a tight-knit, inward-looking community bound by a common interest and loyalty to the clan. This effect was not lost on the resident migrant workers, who suddenly found themselves excluded from these activities and relegated to the role of spectators. As one elderly lady put it: "We are just tenants here. We don't participate. It's none of our business."

Hence, the strong ties of the family and the clan quickly replaced the weak ties of everyday interaction in an urbanized society. The degree of group coherence is illustrated by the fact that the demonstrations were organized without the prior knowledge of village authorities, and it was demonstrated to us when we enquired about the leadership of the demonstrations. At first, all of the villagers we interviewed denied that the demonstrations were organized and instead claimed that they had occurred "spontaneously" (*ziyuan zifa* 自愿自发).[34] Later, when trust was established, residents of village B frequently referred to the "organizers" of the protests, and they made phone calls to unidentified individuals to ask them if petitions and other material could be relayed to us.[35] Finally, we were told about the anti-corruption work of the dragon boat association and that it had been disbanded by the local authorities in February 2009[36] because it allegedly "represented the village without the consent of the village authorities."[37] As the videos of the demonstration show, most of the more vocal activists in the demonstration had belonged to this association.[38] In village A, an informant likewise told us that there were indeed protest organizers.[39]

The existence of heightened grievances, a community held together by mutual trust and a leadership group commanding a large amount of social capital were critical ingredients for the mobilization of the demonstrations in both villages. However, our interviews confirm Li and O'Brien's observation that fear of being ostracized by the community is a potent mobilization instrument as well. Active participants in the risky business of demonstrating against official misconduct were regarded as heroes, especially if they were arrested in the struggle for the collective good. Non-participation carried the risk of social stigmatization. In the tightly knit communities brought about by the re-activation of strong ties, those excluded from the community risk having their weddings and funerals boycotted and even the threat of physical violence.[40]

Interviewees in both villages reiterated that every villager had a responsibility to participate in collective resistance and fight for the collective good.[41] According to an informal rule, at least one family member should be represented

34 Interviews BI1-5; Interview BM4; Interview AW1. This is understandable, as forming an organization without prior approval from the government is a violation of state security regulations and punishable with long prison sentences. See Yu 2003b.
35 Interview BW6.
36 Interview BM2; Interview BM4.
37 Interviews BI1-5.
38 Interviews BM2.
39 Interviews Sun. To protect them, however, he did not identify them to us.
40 Li, Lianjiang, and O'Brien 2008, 7.
41 Interviews BI1-5; Interviews BW5.

in such activities, or else face exclusion from the community. One old lady in village B was very sceptical of collective action, as she still remembered being struggled against in the Cultural Revolution.[42] For this reason, she prevented her sons from participating in the protests, but despite the fear of being punished once more, she took part in the activities herself in order to prevent her family from facing social sanctions.

The activists strengthened these rules by constantly referring to them. In public meetings, for example, activists in village B exhorted villagers to be courageous and fight to the end, and held themselves up as valiant examples of not being "afraid of getting into trouble" for the sake of the public good. Non-participants, however, were despised as cowards.[43]

The strength of these ties was put to the test when the authorities sent in the police to break up the demonstrations and arrest the protestors; the cost of opposing the authorities had increased significantly. In both villages, activists and some ordinary villagers were caught and detained by the police not only during the demonstrations, but also over the course of the sit-ins that followed.[44] At this point, it had become clear to the villagers that they would not be able to rely on networks such as those described by Shi and Cai. The smooth execution of the Asian Games, scheduled to be held later in 2010, was the first priority for all administrative levels from the central government downwards, and a strict ban on negative reporting rendered engaging the media futile. Despite this, collective action continued. Especially in village B, protest activities were attended every day by a large and constant number of participants. In fact, facing a superior enemy strengthened the collective identity of the protesters, heroes were created on a daily basis, and their opposition to the local authorities became more intense. This unity grew with each oppressive act endured.[45]

Adaptive Leadership

While heightened grievances, a charismatic leadership and re-activated strong ties are enough to *organize* large demonstrations, these factors are not enough to *sustain* collective action. This applies especially to contexts where collective action is repressed by the authorities. In our two villages, this is exactly what happened, and it is instructive to examine closely how the protest leaders reacted to this challenge. It is in this respect that the differences between the two otherwise very similar villages become apparent, and it is likely that this disparity accounts for collective action breaking down earlier in village A than in village B. Most importantly, sustained collective action requires an adaptive leadership, i.e. the ability of an organization to adjust its strategies and frames when faced with

42 Interview BW6.
43 Video B1, showing the assembly in village B, Guangzhou, taken by villagers on 21 August 2009.
44 Interview AM1; Interview BM5; Interview BM6.
45 Interviews BM2; Interview BW4.

challenges that threaten its survival. In village B, this entailed a) studying and utilizing laws and regulations; b) adjusting routines and frames when faced with repression; c) employing modern information and communication technologies; and d) imposing a division of labour on the protesters. This kind of organizational learning, and especially the successful application of advanced information and communication technologies, has received insufficient attention in the literature on collective action in and beyond China.

While the leadership capacities of those orchestrating the activities in village A basically stagnated, the protest organizers in village B proved capable of learning. The former continued to rely on charisma and respect, which was bolstered when two of the three organizers, a father and his daughter, were imprisoned for their alleged leadership role in the demonstrations. An activist associated with the son (who had not been arrested owing to a lack of evidence of his participation) denied this charge and claimed that the protests in village A had no formal organization. According to her, villagers assembled and prepared their activities spontaneously. The young man whose father and sister had been arrested regretted that they did not know more about the law, their rights or about running an organization, and believed that more knowledge about these issues would have prevented many of the arrests.[46]

There is some truth to this. The mobilization in village B was more tightly organized and the activists were better educated and more aware of their rights. The young men who spearheaded the demonstration argued eloquently with the village officials, and the videos taken of these confrontations show them citing laws and regulations to justify their actions and to put the village officials on the spot.[47] However, they were also very careful to not break the law themselves. Protest leaders reiterated the importance of keeping public order and "not destroying public property" during the demonstration.[48] When walking back to the village compound at the end of the day, the protesters urged each other to hurry up when crossing the main street in order not to block the traffic. It is probably because of their rights awareness and their more cautious approach that fewer activists in village B were arrested, although their demonstration was larger and lasted longer. In contrast, the activists in village A were reckless in confronting the authorities and distributing the visual documentation of this confrontation.[49] Journalists who were present at the August demonstration recalled that public thoroughfares were blocked with the help of trucks, which led to the arrest of some protesters and two of the protest organizers.[50] Such radical action is often the result of extreme excitement and anger in the absence of discipline and leadership in "spontaneous organizations."[51]

46 Interviews AW1; Interviews with Sun.
47 Video B.
48 Ibid.
49 Video A.
50 Interviews Jia and Xi.
51 See Ying 2011.

Another important difference can be found in the organizational structures underlying collective action: in contrast to village A, where family ties served as the only glue holding the protesters together, the activists in village B were also able to make use of pre-existing traditional institutions. Arguably, this enabled them to operate more efficiently and professionally than their counterparts in village A.

Organizational learning in village B became apparent in five additional domains. First of all, the activists developed what might be called a "corporate identity" to demonstrate their unity in the struggle against the village officials. Second, direct action was routinized, which not only demonstrated perseverance, but also imposed discipline on the participants. Third, modern technologies of communication were employed to facilitate contact between the protesters and rally support from outside. Relatedly, the protesters sought to enlist the help of allies they considered powerful. Last but not least, a division of labour was imposed after some of the organizers were arrested. Young men, the principal wage earners in most families, coordinated the protests from behind the scenes; those who participated in the sit-ins were mainly elderly people, many of them women.

As for corporate identity, the participants of the sit-ins in village B were clearly recognizable by their headgear: all wore red hats embroidered with the characters for "fight corruption" (*fanfu* 反腐). These hats were not worn during the three-day demonstration, when protesters and onlookers were indistinguishable. Interestingly, nobody admitted having bought these hats – according to the villagers, "somebody" simply placed them "somewhere" in the village, and the protesters simply helped themselves.[52] We never saw the protesters in village A wear any kind of uniform. One informant claimed that such equipment had existed but was seized by the police,[53] but this is difficult to verify as none of the film footage of the protest shows the protesters wearing these clothes.

Second, the participants of the sit-ins in village B developed a routine that enabled them to continue the action without frequent leadership involvement. Protestors appeared collectively at 9 am, returned home for lunch, and then left the construction site at 5 pm. Not everyone made it on time in the morning, but the protesters usually left together. They formed lines and marched towards the village committee compounds, where they stopped to wave and greet the mainly elderly protesters who had assembled there.[54]

Third, the younger and better-educated protestors were very active disseminating information and documenting the protests on the internet. As several studies show, new media such as blogs, short messages and other forms of virtual communication have become an important means for activists to communicate and to

52 Interviews BI1-5.
53 Interviews Sun.
54 Observations on 22, 29 and 30 January 2010.

augment or even replace face-to-face communication.[55] This was certainly the case in village B, where innovations included the creation of a close-ended web forum and a QQ (online instant messenger) membership group limited to village members. This platform was reportedly used to share protest-related information.[56] In addition, the protestors in village B recorded many of their actions on video and published several of these videos on various video-sharing websites, including YouTube. Finally, they produced and circulated an agitation video. This video shows stills and sequences of earlier protests, with revolutionary songs with altered lyrics sung in the background. Appealing to the villagers' sense of dignity, the makers of the video liken them to "lions waking after a long sleep" and exhort them to stand up and fight against their oppressors.[57]

While the sit-in protesters came into direct confrontation with the authorities, the young and better-educated villagers were soon engaged in an online battle with the internet police. Many of the web forum posts that were deleted by the administrators were quickly reposted elsewhere. Interestingly, the public blogs and web forums (where videos of collective activities were posted) served as an inspiration to protestors and villagers from other locations as well. This observation ties in well with recent contributions showing that protestors see the media as a strategic ally, because media involvement often determines if a movement succeeds or not.[58] As this support was elusive in villages A and B, the young men in village B sought to raise the public profile of their protest by alternative means.

Finally, there was a division of labour in order to minimize the losses for the involved families. As mentioned above, every family in village B was under great pressure to contribute manpower to the protests, which explains the larger and more regular turnout than in village A. Carefully weighing the risks and opportunities, each family made a decision on who should represent them in the sit-ins. The participation of the young men, who had been active in the demonstration and were easily identifiable on the videos filmed by the police, visibly dwindled. Many of them were of course working on weekdays, but even on the weekends only a few young villagers could be seen among those protesting at the construction site or in front of the village committee. We were informed that none of the young activists who had been arrested in previous protest activities dared to participate in further direct collective action. Those who had taken part in the demonstration also decided to lay low even if they had not been arrested.[59] Thus, it was nearly impossible to recruit young men for direct collective action. According to one elderly woman whose sons were both working in the public

55 Zheng and Wu 2005; Yang 2008. More generally on the "scale politics" of telecommunication, see Adams 1996.
56 Interviews BI1-5.
57 Video B.
58 Cai 2009; Chase and Mulvenon 2002.
59 Interview BW4.

sector in Guangzhou city, the risk of being fired and forsaking a promising future was just too big.[60]

As mentioned above, many young men continued with their resistance behind the scenes and, particularly in village B, were instrumental in organizing and coordinating resistance. Sit-in demonstrators mentioned that most of the material used in the protests, such as petition letters, slogans, banners and printed hats, were prepared by educated young villagers.[61] In addition, those with influential connections outside of their village thought that they would be put to better use if they used their social capital to mobilize external supporters. Former villagers who, according to rumours, were connected to higher-level authorities were asked to draw the attention of their contacts to the petitions that had been filed.[62] Villagers employed in the media sector were counted on to persuade their colleagues to cover the public meetings and sit-ins.[63] Thus, young and male family members, considered the backbone of the family economy, were soon given roles that meant they were less likely to get caught. By planning and orchestrating collective resistance from behind the scenes, the educated and male inhabitants of village B soon vanished from the streets, and the protest crowd wore a radically different face. After the demonstration, the sit-in protestors in village B consisted mainly of middle-aged, senior and female villagers.

Our interviewees confirmed that they considered the risk of losing a young wage earner much higher than allowing an old family member to get caught.[64] In addition, the protesters displayed confidence that respect for the elderly would inhibit the security forces from mistreating those protesters. Some older protesters resumed their activities as soon as they were released from prison. A retired man in his 60s almost immediately returned to the sit-ins after he had served 20 days in detention: "When he saw me again here [at the site of the sit-in], the policeman who had arrested me asked me why I still dared to come. I said of course I come. I have to fight for my rights. Even if you hold your gun to my head, I will still come here. We are not afraid because we have done nothing illegal."[65] Besides showcasing the determination of many of the elderly protesters, this example also makes clear that the activists might have miscalculated the resolve and ingenuity of the authorities. Reportedly, some men in their 60s and early 70s were detained, despite their age. In contrast, sit-in protestors in village B reported that the police did refrain from arresting an elderly activist when they heard that he was already in his late 70s. However, what prompted this decision was not respect but rather a concern that the old man might die in

60 Interviews BW6.
61 Interview BW4.
62 Interviews BM2.
63 Interview AM1.
64 Interviews BI1-5; Interviews Sun. This confirms findings by Kevin O'Brien and William Hurst that retirees aged between 50 and 65 are more likely to participate in protests because they do not have to raise a family and because they can draw on experiences of activism made, e.g., in the Cultural Revolution. See Hurst and O'Brien 2002.
65 Interview BM4.

custody. The police detained his son instead, although the young man had only sporadically joined the sit-ins.[66]

The choice of who should protest also had a gender dimension. Our informal survey revealed that the majority of the protesters were female, aged between 40 and 75 years old, and jobless. We were told that women who did not contribute to the family income were selected for participation in the protests because it would hurt the family less if the police caught them. In addition, we learned that women were less likely to be arrested as they were deemed incapable of playing a major role in the protests. Finally, for whatever reasons, women were more likely than their male counterparts to shield themselves from the police cameras by covering their face with hats, hands or umbrellas.

Framing Resistance

As pointed out in the introduction, some scholars emphasize the importance of narratives around which collective action is organized. Our findings confirm the importance of common frames that give collective action meaning. They aid the participants in making sense of their actions, assuring them that what they are doing benefits the common good. On the other hand, such frames can also be directed outward in that they serve as a common base on which alliances between like-minded groups can be forged. Again, village B performed much better in this dimension than village A.

In village A, the demonstrators demanded higher compensation and justified this with their poor living conditions. Allegations of corruption were also raised, but they played a secondary role in communicating their aims. In village B, the activists were well aware that their success relied on the enlistment of two powerful allies: the media and higher-level governments. This, they reasoned, could best be achieved if they rallied their particular interests behind the struggle for a public good, especially if it was high on the central government's priority list. Although the goal of the activists was increased control over land conversion, the protests were more generally directed against the alleged corruption and malfeasance of the village authorities. In fact, the protesters made the resolving of the "corruption problem" a precondition for engaging in redevelopment talks with the village authorities. Bringing down the incumbent village government on corruption charges would enable villagers to elect a village committee that was more sympathetic to the interests of the house owners, who were all shareholders in the "village cooperation company" that administered the collective land, but who were not granted any influence in the conversion process.

Activists in village B also sought to create a sense of community by defining themselves as part of a national anti-corruption drive. For example, when asked what they were doing, one of the elderly ladies we interviewed at the

66 Interviews BM2.

sit-in site proudly answered: "Didn't you read the newspaper? We fight corruption." A younger respondent added, "We are China's most stubborn anti-corruption village."[67] As mentioned above, the long duration of the collective action did not seem to tire people but, on the contrary, made them more defiant. Those who were arrested or faced bullying were celebrated as heroes, and as time went by, they began to avail themselves of class struggle rhetoric. Although many of them had earned handsomely from renting out rooms, they portrayed themselves as the poor and oppressed who were forced to struggle against the rich and greedy village officials.[68] Allusions to the Cultural Revolution were made by singing revolutionary songs, albeit with lyrics composed for the occasion: corrupt village officials and police officers were criticized harshly to the tune of "The east is red" (*Dongfang hong* 东方红).[69] In addition, they borrowed the theme tune of an old Hong Kong drama, *Huo Yuanjia* 霍元甲, about a group of heroes fighting foreign invaders. The song is aptly named "The Great Wall never falls" (*Wan li changcheng yong bu dao* 万里长城永不倒.)[70]

In sum, the fact that they were able to frame a group-based collective interest as a public interest shows that the activists in village B had the ability to adjust their agenda strategically to fit both their group-specific aims and the struggle for a genuine public good.

Discussion

Given the focus on the technical details of collective action in much of the literature, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it is not only success or failure that changes the lives of those engaging in collective action, but also the decision to take part. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the residents in our field research locations felt compelled to leave their comfortable homes and become involved in a protest routine of unknown duration that forced them to brave the heat, rain and cold as well as the threat of arrest. As there was no register of attendance and "having other things to do" was a legitimate excuse for absence, it is remarkable that the sit-ins continued for so long.

We have identified four factors that influence the duration of collective action: the severity of grievances; the capability of the organizers to frame their actions; the ability to change leadership strategies when the need arises; and the availability of social capital to generate trust and prevent free riding. It is important to note that this article is not concerned with the explanation of success or failure of collective action, but the factors that help to sustain it. Although related, these are different questions. As Cai Yongshun has convincingly shown, the former is the eventual outcome of interactions between protesters and the government, and

67 Interviews BM7 and BW7.
68 Video B.
69 Interview BM3.
70 Video B. For the role of symbolic performances in protest activities, see also Wasserstrom 1991 and Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990.

by definition a zero-sum game. In contrast, this article is concerned with the factors that enable protesters to withstand increasing pressure, which is a matter of degree. Eventually, both instances of collective action analysed here succumbed to the pressure exerted by the local authorities, but it is relevant that village B held out so much longer than village A.

Much of the existing literature has examined the impact of these four factors on collective action in isolation, but our analysis has illustrated that they are closely interrelated. Grievances play a double function: the severity of the grievances (how much is at stake) largely determines if collective action is initiated or not, and how many participants can be mobilized. The nature of the grievance influences the second factor, i.e. the frames and strategies chosen by the organizers to address this grievance. Although the grievances in village A and village B were the same, the protest leaders in village B were far more adept than those in village A at framing their protests as a struggle for the public good. While the former used an anti-corruption, clean government agenda to unite their followers and mobilize external support, the latter sounded more "selfish" by merely asking for fair compensation.[71] Social capital, the third factor, was the glue that held the protest community together in both villages. It is remarkable that the thinning out of family rituals and the diversification of life styles did not destroy the family bonds that tied many of the villagers together. Family-based norms and values could be reactivated overnight to turn a diverse neighbourhood into a close-knit community. The trust produced by these ties allowed the surreptitious mobilization of half the village, leaving the village cadres ignorant of the plans for the demonstration. Finally, social ostracism also contributed to the resolution of the free rider problem in both locations.

While the above observations tie in well with the existing theoretical literature on overcoming collective action problems, our study contributes new insights into the importance of organizational learning. Unlike in village A, the protests in village B became increasingly sophisticated. They combined petitions and sit-ins with online activities: the internet enabled them to exchange information secretly, and to communicate their goals and actions to the outside world. Finally, they devised a division of labour to reduce the likelihood of the key organizers – and breadwinners – being arrested. We hold this to be the main reason why the protests in village B could be sustained for much longer than in village A. It is very likely that the existence of a formal organization that could be put to other use, and the experience of organizing events and coordinating people were also crucial factors.

We believe that these findings can be applied to other localities as well. In their study of rightful resistance, O'Brien and Li point out that indirect action often turns into direct action if the authorities do not address the grievances of petitioners. Given that the vast majority of petitions in China remain unaddressed

71 The choice of "anti-corruption" is not confined to our field locations, as Li, Lianjiang, Liu and O'Brien's (2012) account of petitioning in Beijing makes clear.

and that land-related petitions have increased sharply since the early 2000s, it is possible that there are many villages similar to the ones we studied. Local governments continue to attempt to hush up incidences of social unrest and such cases are usually only reported when collective action becomes violent or when it is successful.

Sustained collective action is a feature of the Chinese political landscape that deserves further attention. As important as the factors and contexts that influence *if* collective action succeeds or fails are those that determine *how* it succeeds or fails. Many questions remain. Is there a geographical dimension to sustained collective action? Are conditions for protracted resistance better where protesters have access to social media? If so, how will the ongoing "informationalization" (*xinxihua* 信息化) of even remote rural regions affect state–society relations in China? What impact do the factors discussed here have on the progression of collective action towards violence and accommodation? Finally, do different kinds of pre-existing social ties have different impacts on the dynamics of collective action? Were Granovetter and Putnam wrong to claim that weak ties are more important than strong ties in sustaining collective action,[72] or is collective action most successful where organizers can make use of both weak and strong social ties?

The findings in this article suggest the following tentative answers which need to be tested in future research. Regarding geography, our findings lead us to expect that collective action mainly occurs in urbanizing localities, where land prices are increasing rapidly but local administrations lack the funds or are reluctant to compensate farmers. In such locations, grievances are severe enough for individuals to take to the streets despite the risk of crackdowns by the local government. In addition, proximity to the city allows organizers and participants to utilize both strong and weak ties. Finally, the technologies and knowledge needed to adapt protest leadership to changing circumstances and to disperse legitimizing frames among participants and sympathetic external audiences are readily accessible. For these reasons, collective action is easier to sustain in urbanizing or peri-urban localities than in remote rural villages.

This insight also applies to the question of how the government-sponsored diffusion of modern information and communication technologies to rural China will change the nature of collective action in China. Our findings are quite illustrative in this respect: although village A and village B are located equally near to the centre of Guangzhou city, only the protest organizers in village B used modern technology to communicate with the protesters and to make their grievances known to audiences outside the village. As numerous studies have shown, cellular phones, the internet and media such as microblogs and social networking platforms have changed the face of protest action in China in that they provide unprecedented opportunities to obtain and distribute information.

72 Cf. Granovetter 1973; Granovetter 1983; Putnam 2000.

However, the availability of these communication tools does not determine protest outcomes. Protests could be sustained for so long in village B because the organizers skilfully blended traditional and modern mobilization instruments. As Papic and Noonan aptly put it: "social media are tools that allow revolutionary groups to lower the costs of participation, organization, recruitment and training. But like any tool, social media have inherent weaknesses and strengths, and their effectiveness depends on how effectively leaders use them and how accessible they are to people who know how to use them."[73] Again, we believe that it is more likely to find this combination of leadership quality and access to technology in urbanizing areas than in remote rural areas.

As for violence and accommodation, our findings suggest that more sophisticated protests such as those witnessed in village B are less likely to turn violent. The organizers repeatedly urged the demonstrators not to violate any laws and not to disrupt public order because they knew that violence would delegitimize their protests and invite government crackdowns. While this is primarily the result of a far-sighted leadership, other factors also have an impact on how protests turn violent. As the words and actions of some of our interviewees illustrate, the authorities' failure to respond to grievances becomes a grievance in itself. While one might assume that non-responsiveness to a grievance kindles desperation, we observed to the contrary that it strengthened a resolve to uphold one's dignity, even if this came at the price of physical integrity. This was reflected in the legitimizing frames shared among the protesters, which became more radical after the authorities had cracked down on protest activities. Although scared, the protesters would not allow themselves to be cowed into submission. A mixture of peer pressure and stories of resistance elsewhere proved potent enough to keep this resolve alive. Not surprisingly, protests can easily turn emotional and spiral out of control when the authorities are perceived as unresponsive and, depending on the circumstances, they can then take very extreme forms such as violent disruptive action or public suicide.

Finally, the study also tells us something about the relationship between strong and weak social ties, and once more we surmise that it is those localities which are no longer rural but are not completely urbanized that have some distinct characteristics beneficial to sustained collective action. In his 1973 essay, Granovetter famously stated that "strong ties, breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation" of a community,[74] and concluded that strong ties are an obstacle to community organization.[75] In contrast, weak ties link individuals to larger networks and thereby provide them with information and opportunities unaccessible to members of inward-looking communities. While generally reaffirming his argument, Granovetter does point out in his follow-up essay ten years later

73 Papic and Noonan 2011.
74 Granovetter 1973, 1378.
75 Ibid., 1373–76.

that "strong ties have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available."[76]

Our findings indicate that these categories should not be used too statically. First of all, strong ties in changing societies can lie dormant and, as our examples have illustrated, be re-activated. Second, and relatedly, this enables a community to turn outward and, if faced with a common threat, turn inward again. This constellation enabled village B to benefit from both kinds of ties: strong ties were the foundation that ensured cohesion and trust within the community, while weak ties allowed core individuals to interact with other networks.

It is questionable if this finding is valid for other social structures. The simultaneous utilization of strong and weak ties might be confined to the hybrid social fabric of the peri-urban village. Here, many members have weak ties into the city. However, at the same time dormant clan ties can be re-activated when the community is faced with external threats. In this respect, *chengzhongcun* and peri-urban villages are different from either remote rural villages, where individuals are primarily linked by strong ties, or from the cities, where weak ties tend to be prevalent. This exceptional character makes *chengzhongcun* a subject for further investigation.

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76 Granovetter 1983, 209.

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Appendix: Interviews

AM1, interview with male activist in village A, notes taken during interview, 8 February 2010.
AW1, interviews with female activist in village A, notes taken during interviews, 8 February 2010 and 22 February 2010.
AW2, interview with female activist in village A, notes taken after interview, 8 February 2010.
BM1, interviews with male protester in village B, notes taken after interviews, 27 January 2010 and 29 January 2010.
BM2, interviews with male protester in village B, notes taken after interviews, 29 January 2010 and 30 January 2010.
BM3, interview with male protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 30 January 2010.
BM4, interview with male protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 30 January 2010.
BM5, interview with male protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 10 February 2010.
BM6, interview with male protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 10 February 2010.
BM7 and BW7, interviews with male protester and female protester, Guangzhou, notes taken after interviews, 22 January 2010.
BI1-5, focus interviews with five female informants in village B, notes taken during interviews, 25 January 2010, 27 January 2010 and 29 January 2010.
BW3, interview with female protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 30 January 2010.

BW4, interview with female protester in village B, notes taken after interview, 3 February 2010.
BW5, interviews with female protester in village B, notes taken after interviews, 5 February 2010 and 8 February 2010.
BW6, interviews with female protester in village B, notes taken after interviews, 5 February 2010 and 8 February 2010.
Li, interview with official from the local public security department, notes taken after interview, 23 February 2010.
Jia and Xi, interviews with local female journalist, Jia, and local male journalist, Xi, in Guangzhou, notes taken during interviews, 25 February 2010.
Sun, interviews with male informant, Sun, in village A, notes taken during interviews, 27 January 2010 and 29 January 2010.